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ABSTRACT

Most teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Maine live over 30 miles from the nearest University of Maine campus. While the Maine Department of Education has been offering intensive ESL teacher training courses, a lack of qualified ESL teachers persists. The advent of microwave transmission means more opportunities for teacher training through instructional television. In addition to access, the primary advantage, the medium offers other advantages, including: exploitation of visuals; use of student-produced videotapes; presentations by guest lecturers; use of simulation; class management through two-way audio; accommodation of students' different learning modalities; rescheduling of cancelled classes; and easy use of small-size visuals. Disadvantages include these: spontaneity is limited; personal teacher-student rapport is neutralized; distribution of paper becomes expensive; visual student-to-teacher feedback is lacking; mechanical malfunction can waste a class session; the medium is not yet technologically sophisticated; cooperative learning opportunities are limited; kinesthetic and tactile learners are at a disadvantage; and everything takes longer. Despite these drawbacks, the medium has great potential and should be pursued. (MSE)

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LEARNING FROM A DISTANCE:

U-MAINE & ESL GO ELECTRONIC

by Barney Bérubé, Ph.D.

"What is the use of this new invention?"
someone asked Benjamin Franklin. His reply:
"What is the use of a new-born child?"

Most teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Maine live more than thirty miles from the nearest of Maine's light university campuses. One even lives on an island with two-way ferry service available once daily. There are other ESL practitioners who do live near university campuses, of course, but ESL coursework is excluded among the hundreds of offerings otherwise available. ESL coursework has occurred from time to time at UM situated 150 miles north of the geographic area of greatest need. But the effort has been noble indeed.

The Maine Department Of Education, in its generosity and wisdom in utilizing federal grants, has been offering ESL-intensive week-long institutes for some ten years now. During that time, there was a proliferation of new immigrants coming to Maine from countries where English is not the functional language. And the need for help grew; the absence of qualified language support teachers for these children was too long a neglected need. At the same time the university system was exploring ways of becoming multicultural, pluralistic, and international - most of this in reaction to external critical influences.

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In 1984 the Maine State Legislature passed the Education Reform Act. A tiny piece of the legislation strengthened the case for culturally relevant teacher certification. The State Board of Education adopted, for the first time in the state's history, definitive requirements for those teachers wishing to teach in ESL or bilingual education programs. All this, but still no university initiatives for ESL Teacher Training. The Department of Education simply continued to crank out graduate level summer institutes in ESL.

Five years passed. Enter fiber-optic magic: microwave transmission cabling its way to scores of Maine sites - high schools, university campuses, and ITV center sites. In a state where 63% of its 123 school systems enroll more than 1600 students of limited English proficiency (LEP), ITV technology has inevitably become the sine qua non for access to ESL teachers seeking to meet the State Board of Education teacher endorsement requirements or to prepare for ESL teaching. Never before has the case for access to this underserved segment of the teaching profession been more compelling!

The ITV medium, pioneered for ESL in 1990, deserves a retrospective - embryonic though the beastie still is. It is well that the University of Southern Maine is monitoring the progress of ITV from both the faculty's and the students' points of view. I realize that most of my sentiments are consistent with much of what was reported from the University's 1990 Testing

and Assessment Center's Reports.

As indicated already, the matter of access overshadows so much of all else I could probe, given the crucial void ITV has begun to fill. But there are several particularly favorable spinoffs that a would-be ESL instructor would not have set his sights on in introducing a course in ESL via ITV. Among these:

(1) There is an unlimited opportunity for the exploitation of visuals in teaching.

(2) Students were given their day on TV-land's stage to provide video demonstrations of learnings gained-in this case ESL micro-teaching methodologies. Some students tried a few bizarre effects with their camcorders and sets that would make Steven Spielberg salivate.

(3) Guest lecturers were given opportunity to prepare presentations - to experiment with the novelty of this medium - and with wonderful results, notably in the area of ESL action visuals and in newspaper media in the classroom.

(4) Simulations of actual class projects were used by the instructor to demonstrate ESL methodology - this would have been very difficult to orchestrate in a conventional "live" classroom.

(5) Class management through active one-way video and two-way audio; class participation occurred more favorably- one-way audio may have helped encourage less aggressive students to speak in class.

(6) Creative Teaching challenges to accommodate students' varied learning modalities strengthened course delivery.

(7) Cancelled classes can be liberally re-scheduled to meet instructor and student convenience, since a class session can be simply played back - In the event of a storm, a traditional class would find re-scheduling consensus an abominably difficult task.

(8) Small-sized photos and graphics are easily shared with an entire class through the "Wolf" photo projection; in a conventional class, a small photo would have to be passed disruptively around the room one at a time for all to see.

(9) The efficiency of the administrative staff with photocopying, "interactive mail," and the ready availability of tapes for review made ITV additionally workable, especially for the uninitiated instructor. In time, this practice will

undoubtedly become obsolete if the system ever becomes a network for on/line computers, electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards as appears underway under the auspices of a developing model at the Arizona Department of Education.

(10) This medium is good for learners whose modalities are visually and auditorilly rich.

(11) ITV is the best answer to access yet developed, especially for traditionally inaccessible courses for individuals living in rural areas distant from university campuses.

To be sure, teaching and hi-tech is not without its detractors. Its shortcomings are, of course, best·known to ITV technicians, instructors, and indeed students. Among the negatives are:

(1) The joy of spontaneous teaching and the "teachable moment" seems only remotely attainable - at least for the unseasoned ITV teacher. Mailouts must be distributed well in advance of class; students' papers and exam results must, as a result, necessarily be delayed.

(2) In a conventional class, one may show a video tape, a film, or similar other medium at will; on ITV copyright clearances well in advance are mandatory.

(3) No monitor, no phone, no visual can simulate the personal warmth of a hug, a pat on the back. Personal rapport between faculty and student is neutralized; they can't speak privately to each other except by phone or through the mail.

(4) The distribution of paper via the mail is expensive; more paper appears to be needed, hence ecologically unsound.

(5) Since students in the remote sites cannot be seen, the instructor cannot be sure that the subject matter is penetrating (except, of course, when students call in for clarification). In addition, the paralinguistic behavior inherent in students' kinesthetic languages cannot be revealed to help the instructor gauge delivery more appropriately.

(6) In the event of mechanical dysfunction, an entire class session may be wasted. Quite often audio reception can be so poor that students choose simply not to use the phones.

(7) Sophistication of ITV technology is still wanting. All the technician can give is head, live class reaction shots, split screen, oval/diamond instructor inserts, "Chyron" characters, and

"Wolf" photo/graphic projection. But consider several students reporting out where all that is received is audio on the phones with a visual mug shot of an attentive instructor. After several minutes, this can become pedagogically deadly. There remains a need to seek a more workable method for satisfying a similar objective, aside from the written medium, where the intent is large-scale participation.

(8) Cooperative learning opportunities are limited by reason of numbers per site. All sites would have to have at least three students for any legitimate cooperative learning activity to occur. Perhaps when ITV can permit multiple-way audio, cooperative learning can genuinely enhance active student participation.

(9) Kinesthetic and tactile learners are at greatest disadvantage. Keeping the medium from falling into the trap of appearing like the audio and visual modes of the evening TV news constitutes a legitimate challenge.

(10) Everything takes longer.

We see here the dichotomy of a two-sided coin. That would be true, too, of ink wells, slate boards, robots, slide rules, calculators, personal computers, and elementary string orchestras. Positives and negatives may be listed ad nauseum. Alternatives and partnerships remain possible. The small class enrollment from a single geographic area can still occur; students can travel greater distances such as out of state for large-scale ESL programs that Maine cannot meet for a long time to come. Summer institutes deserve to be sustained for the networking they promote, the camaraderie they foster, and the affective needs they appear to satisfy so well.

I would hope to revisit the impressions recorded here in a couple of years. I would judge that the reservations noted will be pared down and that the pluses will grow. Perhaps we

will be taking advantage of cable TV connections potential for even larger audiences as happens at the University of Hawaii. Perhaps, too, UM could set up a system of exchanges with other states via a transportable satellite receive dish. Talk about expansion potential and choices! ITV remains for ESL a most refreshing alternative. I'm happy to be among its early pioneers.

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